

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION OUTLOOK—SOPEMI 2008

Return migration: A new perspective

Highlights

Contexts: The phenomenon of return migration—where immigrants return to their home countries, sometimes after a period of many years—has tended to be overlooked. However, as temporary migration begins to be considered as a way of tackling worker shortages in OECD countries, return migration is attracting growing interest. The potential benefits to developing countries are also getting more attention, especially for the role return migration may play in raising skill levels and in establishing useful links to more developed countries.

The nature of return migration: A few facts and figures offer some insights into the nature and scope of return migration...

- Between 20% and 50% of immigrants leave within five years of arriving in a country, some to return home and some to move to a third country.
- Migrants at either end of the education spectrum—the less educated and the highly educated—are more likely to return home.
- The smaller the development gap between the home and settlement country, the more likely it is that migrants will go back home; return rates to OECD countries are twice as high as those to developing countries.
- Most returns occur within the first three years; after five years the return rate is relatively low, except among migrants reaching retirement age.

Why do migrants return home? Four main reasons can be offered for why people choose to return:

- Failure to find a job or to fit in to the host society;
- A yearning for home;
- Attaining their objective to save a certain sum of money; and
- The emergence of new job opportunities back home.

Do programmes aimed at assisting migrants to return home work? Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that programmes for assisting voluntary return of immigrants—which are receiving increasing attention in OECD countries—have a limited impact. For most immigrants, the possibility of taking advantage of such schemes has to be balanced against the state of the political, economic and social situation back home.

What is the impact of returnees on their home countries?

Returnees can contribute to their home countries in a number of ways, including by bringing back much-needed skills (human capital), valuable contacts (social capital), and financial capital. Some developing countries have sought to encourage emigrants to return, but the results of these initiatives are rarely clear cut. However, even without returning home,

emigrants can play a positive role in their home countries: for example, developing countries may be able to use diaspora networks to promote skill and technology transfers.

Find out more ...

To find out more about return migration, see the special chapter (Part III) of the International Migration Outlook—SOPEMI 2008, from the OECD.